United Nations A/73/374–S/2018/824

General Assembly
Security Council

Distr.: General
10 September 2018

Original: English

General Assembly
Seventy-third session
Agenda item 40
The situation in Afghanistan

Security Council
Seventy-third year

The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2405 (2018), in which the Secretary-General was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of the previous report, on 6 June 2018 (A/72/888-S/2018/539).

II. Relevant developments

3. Political mobilization intensified as opposition groups formed coalitions ahead of parliamentary elections, scheduled for 20 October. A diverse group of political parties continued to demand electoral reforms, with some threatening an electoral boycott if their demands were not met. Following a long series of negotiations with the Government, the First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, returned to Afghanistan after having resided in Turkey for over a year. The electoral management bodies continued preparations for parliamentary elections, although it was proposed that district council elections, initially scheduled for the same date, be postponed because of low numbers of candidate nominations. The Government and the Taliban implemented overlapping ceasefires over the Eid al-Fitr holiday, resulting in a three-day drop in violence and public meetings between government and Taliban loyalists. However, the Taliban rejected calls for an extension of the ceasefire, and both sides resumed offensive operations. The Government declared a second ceasefire for the Eid al-Adha holiday, on the condition that the Taliban reciprocate, but it did not. Security remained volatile, with attacks in Ghazni Province and across northern areas, and civilian casualties continued at very high levels. The Government continued its

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reform efforts in preparation for the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan, to be held on 28 November, finalized its subnational governance policy and completed a mass, merit-based recruitment exercise for the civil service. Drought conditions continued to destroy livelihoods and caused additional population displacement in western Afghanistan. A record number of returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran had so far been recorded in 2018, while returns from Pakistan remained relatively low.

A. Political developments

4. The mobilization of the political opposition described in my previous report intensified as parliamentary elections drew near and difficulties in the process became clearer. Where previously it appeared that the mobilization had been for the purpose of participating in the election, opposition parties increasingly began to criticize the process itself. Parties were particularly sceptical of the announcement by the Independent Election Commission that more than 9 million voters had been registered. Calls for an interim administration to replace the National Unity Government, previously a fringe position, began to emerge within the political mainstream.

5. Discontent over electoral preparations was largely focused in the North, where security conditions continued to deteriorate, and some opposition figures accused the Government of a deliberate plot to disenfranchise northern communities. That perception was exacerbated following the arrest by Government forces on 2 July of Nezamuddin Qaysari, a district chief of police and close associate of Mr. Dostum in Faryab Province. The arrest triggered protests in the Uzbek-majority Faryab Province that quickly spread to other northern provinces, including Balkh, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Samangan, Sari Pul and Takhar. Protestors demanded the release of Mr. Qaysari and the return of Mr. Dostum, who had resided in Turkey since May 2017, with some warning that they would boycott elections and form an autonomous government if their demands were not met. When the Government refused to address the demands, protestors began to block the Kabul to Mazar-e Sharif Highway in Samangan Province, forced the closure of the provincial offices of the Independent Election Commission in six provinces and blocked the road leading from the important land port at Maymana. After two weeks of mounting instability, the Government began negotiations with the Junbesh-i Milli political party over the return of the First Vice-President. As part of the negotiations, Mr. Qaysari was released from prison on 21 July and returned to a mutually agreed location, accompanied by guards from the National Directorate of Security and from Junbesh-i Milli.

6. Following negotiations with representatives of the Presidential Palace, Mr. Dostum returned to Kabul on 22 July. He was greeted by a large gathering of political figures, including the former governor of Balkh Province, Atta Noor, and Second Chief Executive Officer, Mohammad Mohaqeq. Speaking at the gathering, Mr. Dostum announced his intention to work with the Government on peace and elections. Following Mr. Dostum's return, the protests in the North immediately subsided, allowing the reopening of borders, highways and Government offices in six provinces. There were no developments in the legal proceedings against Mr. Dostum, who remained under indictment for the alleged sexual assault of a political rival in 2016.

7. Following months of negotiations between opposition groups, the Grand National Coalition of Afghanistan was launched in Kabul on 26 July. The new Coalition brought together members of the former Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan, also known as the Ankara Alliance, including Mr. Dostum, Mr. Noor and Mr. Mohaqeq, as well as representatives of other political parties and formerly

unaligned opponents of the Government. This demonstrated a further expansion of the original base of the Ankara Alliance, which had originally been conceived as a largely northern, non-Pashtun and former jihadi grouping. The former President, Hamid Karzai, endorsed the objectives of the Coalition, although he did not formally join the group.

8. A separate but overlapping coalition of 27 political parties, first established in March, continued to demand changes to the electoral system and to cast doubt on the independence of the Independent Election Commission. As the voter registration process ended, the group demanded that the voter list be invalidated and that biometric voter registration take place. However, the Commission responded that those demands were impossible to implement before the October elections. A series of discussions convened by the Second Vice-President, Sarwar Danesh, with the Commission and the group towards the end of July and beginning of August were inconclusive. As negotiations faltered, the parties threatened to boycott or obstruct the holding of elections if their demands were not met. Some members joined former President Karzai in calling for the establishment of an interim administration.

9. The appointment on 19 July of the Chief Electoral Officer to the Independent Election Commission aided preparations for the parliamentary elections scheduled for 20 October, as the crucial post had been vacant since late in 2017. Voter registration, which had begun in provincial centres on 14 April, was subsequently extended to districts and rural areas, and ended on 27 July. The Commission announced that around 9.5 million voters had been registered, of which 34 per cent were women. Once registration was complete, the Commission began digitizing the records to create a single list of voters that could be checked for duplication and disaggregated by polling station. Opposition parties and many political figures have cast doubt on the credibility of the number of voters registered, citing poor security conditions and alleging fraud.

10. Protests over the past and likely future disenfranchisement due to insecurity in Ghazni Province prevented electoral preparations, as representatives of the Pashtun and Tajik communities held protests demanding the Province be divided into smaller electoral constituencies. Protesters blocked the provincial election commission's office throughout the registration period, preventing both voter registration and candidate nomination. On 25 June, the Independent Election Commission decided to divide Ghazni into three electoral constituencies as a possible solution to the disenfranchisement concerns. However, the decision failed to appease the protestors and triggered counter-protests by the Hazara community, resulting in the continued closure of the provincial office of the Commission.

11. The registration of candidates for parliamentary and district council elections ended on 12 and 14 June, respectively, with a preliminary list of parliamentary candidates for 33 provinces published on 2 July. However, candidate numbers for district council elections were low, with only 40 out of 387 districts presenting a sufficient number of candidates to hold competitive elections. The lack of candidates was mostly due to insecurity, restrictive educational requirements (high school diploma) and a lack of clarity regarding the functions of district councils. On 29 July, the Independent Election Commission formally proposed that district council elections and parliamentary elections for Ghazni Province be postponed under article 104 of the Election Law, which allows for the postponement of elections for reasons of insecurity or other conditions that make holding fair elections impossible. The case was referred to a special committee made up of the National Security Council, the speakers of the two houses of parliament, the Chief Justice and the Chair of the Independent Commission for Oversight of the Implementation of the Constitution, for a final decision.

12. On 27 July, the President appointed 102 commissioners of the provincial offices of the Electoral Complaints Commission, three months after the legally established deadline. As a result of the delayed appointment of commissioners, out of 680 complaints received, only 240 had been adjudicated as at 20 August. In the meantime, according to the provisions of the 2016 Electoral Law, a vetting commission was established, composed of representatives from the Electoral Complaints Commission, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, the Ministry of the Interior and the National Directorate of Security, to identify and remove candidates with links to illegal armed groups. On 4 August, the vetting commission informed 25 candidates that they had been excluded from contesting the election owing to their links with illegal armed groups. Following a review period for those candidates recommended for disqualification, the Electoral Complaints Commission announced on 10 August that a total of 35 candidates had been disqualified. Following the announcement of the final list of candidates, a number of supporters of disqualified candidates began to stage protests in Kabul and around the country. Those protests led to the closure of the Independent Election Commission headquarters compound in Kabul and, as at 21 August, nine provincial offices of the Independent Election Commission, in Badakhshan, Gardez, Kabul, Kunduz, Logar, Parwan, Pul-i-Khumri, Samangan and Takhar. The closure of the Independent Election Commission headquarters effectively halted the process of entering data in the voter registry and the retrieval of voter registration books from a number of provinces, among other electoral preparations. On 8 August, President Ghani issued a decree on ensuring the impartiality of government officials and institutions in elections and the security of the electoral process.

13. The Independent Election Commission approved its gender policy to enhance the participation of women in elections and accredited 17 civil society organizations, 15 media organizations and 20 political parties to monitor and observe all parts of the electoral process. Of the 2,564 candidates for the lower house, the *Wolesi Jirga*, 391 were women.

14. To support preparations for the 2018 elections, the United Nations and the electoral management bodies signed on 25 July a revised Electoral Support Project document, with the donors pledging an additional $57 million in financial support.

15. The momentum in support of a peace process with the Taliban continued, aided by the increasingly active engagement of civil society and religious leaders calling for peace between the Government and the Taliban. Representatives of the People's Peace Movement, which began as a series of sit-ins in southern Afghanistan, marched from Lashkar Gah in Helmand Province, passing through Kandahar, Zabul, Ghazni and Wardak Provinces before reaching Kabul on 18 June. In Kabul, the group staged a series of sit-ins in front of the embassies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America, as well as a compound of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), before undertaking a march to Balkh Province. Religious leaders also took on a more public role in advocating for a peace process. In a gathering on 4 June in Kabul, more than 3,000 religious scholars issued a fatwa declaring the insurgency against the Government of Afghanistan to be illegitimate, and calling on the Taliban to join peace negotiations. That was followed on 10 and 11 July by a gathering in Saudi Arabia of religious leaders from more than 30 countries, in which participants again expressed their support for peace in Afghanistan.

16. Bolstered by pro-peace developments in the civic sphere, signs of flexibility emerged among the main parties to the conflict. On 7 June, President Ghani announced a unilateral eight-day cessation of hostilities with the Taliban beginning on 12 June, to mark the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Two days later, the Taliban issued its own

declaration of a three-day ceasefire over the holiday period from 15 to 17 June. The ensuing three days of overlapping ceasefires witnessed a significant drop in violent incidents, with the only major exceptions being two suicide attacks in Jalalabad on 16 and 17 June, both claimed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). Taliban fighters entered government-controlled areas throughout the country, and unprecedented public meetings took place in many provinces between Government officials and Taliban leaders. On 16 June, the Government announced that the ceasefire would be extended for a further 10 days following the holiday. The Taliban rejected an extension of its ceasefire and, on 18 June, relaunched offensive operations. While the ceasefires were largely greeted with enthusiasm on social media, some political figures and civil society organizations criticized the Government for the unilateral extension of the ceasefire. On 30 June, President Ghani announced the official end of the Government's ceasefire and stated that the Government would like to begin an intra-Afghan dialogue as soon as possible, followed by a second phase involving regional countries, the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

17. In the following weeks, media reports emerged of direct talks between the United States and the Taliban. Despite that reported development, and further accounts of increasing informal contact between all parties, direct peace negotiations between the Government and the Taliban did not materialize during the reporting period.

18. On 19 August, President Ghani announced a second ceasefire, beginning on the eve of the Eid al-Adha holiday on 20 August through the holiday of Milad ul-Nabi on 19 November. However, the ceasefire was conditional on the announcement of a similar ceasefire by the Taliban, which did not formally respond. The Government's announcement was welcomed by members of the international community, including Pakistan, the United States and NATO, but generated controversy on social media and sparked a small demonstration in Kabul.

19. The Government made limited progress on the implementation of its September 2016 peace agreement with Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin. On 25 July, representatives of the group met with representatives of the NATO Resolute Support Mission to discuss a list of 59 outstanding prisoners proposed for release by Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin. However, repeated requests for their release were rejected, largely owing to insufficient guarantees that the released prisoners would not rejoin the insurgency. On 28 July, members of the joint executive secretariat for the implementation of the agreement met with representatives of the National Directorate for Security, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence to discuss implementation of the agreement, including future prisoner releases and land allocation, as well as the possible effect of a recent wave of security sector retirements on security personnel affiliated with Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin.

B. Security

20. The security situation remained volatile, with continuing high numbers of incidents briefly interrupted by the reduction in violence during the Eid al-Fitr ceasefires. Between 15 May and 15 August, UNAMA recorded a total of 5,800 security incidents, a 10 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2017. The southern region saw the highest number of incidents followed by the eastern and south-eastern regions, with those three regions accounting for 67 per cent of all incidents. Although armed clashes continued to make up the largest number of security incidents (61 per cent of all incidents), the number of armed clashes fell by 14 per cent compared with the same period in 2017. In terms of other incident categories, suicide attacks increased by 38 per cent and air strikes by the Afghan Air

Force and international military forces increased by 46 per cent compared with the same period in 2017.

21. Concerns remained over deteriorating security conditions in the north. The Government's control over territory decreased in Faryab Province, as the Taliban captured three district administrative centres and overran the Afghan National Army base in Ghormach over a one-week period in August. High levels of ground engagements were recorded in Balkh, Faryab and Jowzjan Provinces, while incidents along the main ring road had a negative impact on movement between the capitals of the three provinces. In total, the northern region recorded 17 per cent more security incidents over the first half of 2018 than in the same period in 2017.

22. The overall level of violence decreased significantly during the Eid al-Fitr ceasefires, bookended by spikes in armed clashes in the preceding and following weeks. Over the week incorporating the holiday, UNAMA recorded a total of 285 incidents, the lowest level of violence in a one-week period since the 2014 security transition. However, the weeks following the ceasefire again saw a rise in Taliban-initiated armed clashes, as the movement sought to regain the offensive following the unprecedented events of Eid.

23. There were no sustained changes in territorial control between the Government and the Taliban during the reporting period. The Taliban mounted a number of attacks against district administrative centres, temporarily taking control of Jaghatu and Deh Yak in Ghazni Province, Tala Wa Barfak and Burkah in Baghlan Province and Atghar in Zabul Province, before withdrawing following counter-attacks by Afghan national security forces, often supported by international military airstrikes. On 10 August, the Taliban launched a large-scale attack against the capital of Ghazni Province, Ghazni City. Fighting lasted five days before the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces pushed Taliban fighters to the edge of the city. Additional reports were received of attacks against the Deh Yak, Khwajah Omari and Ajrestan district administrative centres in Ghazni Province, and of Taliban ambushes against reinforcements travelling to Ghazni in Zabul, Wardak and Logar Provinces. The main highway from Kabul to Kandahar cities continued to see high levels of insecurity.

24. ISIL-KP remained a significant presence in the eastern region, claiming responsibility for eight suicide and complex attacks in Nangarhar Province during the reporting period, two attacks in Kabul and one in Gardez City. ISIL-KP continued to fight against the Taliban in the East, with armed clashes reported in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces. International military forces continued to target ISIL-KP in Nangarhar Province, conducting a series of air strikes against ISIL-KP targets in Deh Bala, Achin, Khugyani, Naziyan and Chaparhar districts of Nangarhar Province. On 1 August, a large group of fighters proclaiming affiliation with ISIL-KP surrendered to the Government in Jowzjan Province, following a series of fierce battles against Taliban forces. The incident allowed the Taliban to consolidate its position as the pre-eminent insurgent force in Jowzjan and represented a blow to the attempt by ISIL-KP to gain a foothold in the country's north.

25. The Government continued its efforts to implement security sector reform in accordance with its four-year road map. Under the Inherent Law of 2017, 656 generals have been retired from the Afghan National Army in an attempt to promote generational change, rebalance the distribution of ranks and foster stronger leadership. The reforms were expanded to the Ministry of the Interior, with the first of two planned tranches of retirements initiated in July. The Afghan National Police also continued to roll out the verification of personnel, which began on 15 April. The process, which includes biometric registration and proof of vetting of Police personnel, remained ongoing as at August 2018.

26. Contributor countries to the NATO Resolute Support Mission met on 11 and 12 July in Brussels. Reaffirming their commitment to lasting security in Afghanistan, NATO allies and partners announced their commitment to sustain the non-combat mission until conditions indicate that a change in the mission is appropriate. They also agreed to extend financial support for Afghan forces through 2024. NATO emphasized the stability of Afghanistan in the context of the Central Asian region and the role of regional actors in achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan by fully supporting a negotiated political solution.

27. In total, 12 incidents involving United Nations personnel were reported, including 5 cases of intimidation, 1 assassination and 1 improvised explosive device-related incident. A contractor working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) was killed during a complex attack on 31 July on a government facility in Jalalabad City.

C. Regional cooperation

28. The momentum towards a consolidated regional approach to peace in Afghanistan, generated by the second meeting of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, held on 28 February, and the conference held in Tashkent on 26 and 27 March, continued during the reporting period. On 17 July, a delegation from Qatar visited Uzbekistan, where representatives of the two countries discussed implementing the provisions of the Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan reiterated its offer to host direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. On 23 July, Qatar hosted a quadrilateral meeting of national security advisers from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States to discuss the Afghan peace process, countering the financing of terrorism and other aspects of regional cooperation. From 7 to 10 August, a delegation from the Qatar-based Taliban Political Commission visited Uzbekistan, where they met with the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov.

29. Progress was made on the implementation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, which was finalized in May 2018. Meeting in Pakistan on 11 June, Afghan and Pakistani directors-general of military operations agreed to deploy liaison officers in each other's capitals and establish coordination centres to share intelligence. High-level visits between the countries' security institutions continued, for the purpose of increasing cooperation on peace in Afghanistan and bilateral security issues. On 22 July, the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan visited Kabul. Following the election of Imran Khan as Prime Minister of Pakistan, the Prime Minister-elect gave a public address indicating that Pakistan would prioritize peace in Afghanistan. Cross-border shelling continues to be a concerning bilateral issue.

30. Multilateral efforts to improve regional cooperation continued. During the 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, held from 9 to 10 June in Qingdao, China, the importance was underlined of the contact group between the Organization and Afghanistan. Participants reiterated the need for socioeconomic development based on priorities of the Afghan people and greater connectivity and regional integration for Afghanistan. In the press communiqué of the Summit, members of the Organization expressed their support for the mediation of the conflict in Afghanistan and cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism. On 2 July, Afghanistan hosted an ambassadorial meeting of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process. Participating countries assessed the progress made towards achieving the recommendations agreed upon on 19 April at the senior officials meeting, including the expansion of economic cooperation and the reinvigoration of confidence-building measures.

III. Human rights

31. On 15 July, UNAMA released its 2018 midyear update on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.[1] The Mission documented 5,122 civilian casualties (1,692 people killed and 3,430 injured) between 1 January and 30 June 2018, the highest number of civilian deaths recorded in a six-month period since UNAMA began systematic documentation in 2009. Overall levels of civilian harm were similar to the same period in 2017. UNAMA attributed 67 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-government elements (42 per cent to the Taliban, 18 per cent to ISIL-KP, 7 per cent to unidentified anti-government elements, including self-proclaimed ISIL-KP), 20 per cent to pro-government forces, 10 per cent to unattributed crossfire during ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces, and 3 per cent to other incidents, including explosive remnants of war and cross-border shelling.

32. The use of improvised explosive device tactics (including suicide and non-suicide attacks) caused 2,290 civilian casualties (659 people killed and 1,631 injured) and was the leading cause of such casualties during the first half of 2018, accounting for 45 per cent of civilian casualties. Ground engagements, the second leading cause, accounted for 1,494 civilian casualties (360 people killed and 1,134 injured), amounting to 29 per cent of all civilian casualties. UNAMA continued to document high levels of civilian casualties from aerial strikes by pro-government forces, recording 353 civilian casualties (149 people killed and 204 injured), with women and children comprising more than half of those casualties. UNAMA documented 1,355 child casualties (363 children killed and 992 injured), accounting for 24 per cent of all civilian casualties. Women casualties decreased by 15 per cent, with a total of 157 women killed and 387 injured. More than half of the women casualties were caused by ground engagements.

33. Attacks targeting election-related sites from April to June resulted in 341 civilian casualties (117 people killed and 224 injured), most of which (over 250 casualties) resulted from two attacks, in Kabul City on 22 April and in Khost Province on 6 May. UNAMA documented attacks on *tazkira* (national identification card) distribution centres and voter registration sites, as well as attacks against election-related personnel. It also recorded threats, abductions and killings of candidates and their supporters.

34. From 1 April to 30 June, the country task force on monitoring and reporting verified 79 attacks against schools and education-related personnel, including 44 election-related incidents affecting schools, 24 direct attacks on schools, 7 threats against schools and related personnel and 4 attacks against education-related personnel. The task force attributed 73 incidents to anti-government elements (47 to the Taliban, 18 to ISIL-KP, including 1 to self-proclaimed ISIL-KP, and 7 to undetermined anti-government elements), 4 to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and 2 jointly to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and the Taliban during crossfire. The sharp increase in attacks against schools and education-related personnel, up from 11 such incidents in the previous reporting period, is due to the use of schools as voter registration centres and the targeting of education facilities by anti-government elements, apparently in reaction to military operations by pro-government forces. In addition, the task force verified the military use of one school by the Afghan National Army.

35. The task force verified 12 attacks against health facilities and health-care personnel, including 9 attacks against health-care facilities and 3 against health-care

[1] UNAMA, "Midyear update on the protection of civilians in armed conflict: 1 January to 30 June 2018" (Kabul, 2018).

workers, compared with 16 incidents in the previous reporting period. The task force attributed 7 incidents to armed groups (4 to the Taliban, 2 to undetermined anti-government elements and 1 to self-proclaimed ISIL-KP), 2 jointly to international military forces and Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, 1 each to pro-government militia and the Afghan National Police, and 1 jointly to the Afghan National Army and Taliban during crossfire. The task force verified the recruitment and use of two boys by parties to the conflict and documented credible allegations of the recruitment and use of four boys by the Taliban and one boy by the National Directorate of Security and the Taliban. In addition, the task force documented credible allegations of three cases of sexual abuse involving three boys, including for the purpose of *bacha bazi*, attributed to the Afghan National Police and Afghan Local Police.

36. In late May, UNAMA submitted to the Government and selected stakeholders a confidential report in which it documented Afghan communities' awareness of and observations on the prevalence of the recruitment and use of children by parties to the conflict, and the root causes and enabling factors driving such practices in Afghanistan. The report was based on almost 700 interviews as well as monitoring conducted by UNAMA human rights teams between 15 October 2016 and 31 December 2017. The report highlighted the fact that the practice of child recruitment and use is perceived as common in Afghanistan, with the Taliban reported to be the main perpetrators. Communities in all regions of Afghanistan further alleged the use of boys for the purpose of sexual abuse, including *bacha bazi*, by armed forces, in particular the Afghan Local Police and Afghan National Police, and identified poverty and unemployment as underlying causes.

37. Following the criminalization of *bacha bazi* in the new Penal Code, UNAMA hosted an event on 6 August aimed at developing strategies on accountability for that crime and to strengthen responses for victims. Participants included representatives from the Government, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, and international military forces. While not all participants agreed on the extent of the problem and ways in which to address it, all acknowledged the need for sensitization and awareness-raising among the Afghan population and within the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces concerning the criminalization of *bacha bazi*. Suggestions for follow-up included the adoption of a strategy and action plan to look more comprehensively into the issue.

38. The Government, with the support of UNAMA, continued efforts to address violence against women. On 29 May, the Mission and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) launched a report[2] that highlighted the human rights concerns arising from the use of mediation in cases of violence against women. In June, the Government established the High Commission on the Elimination of Harassment against Women and Children to improve implementation of the 2017 Anti-Harassment of Women and Children Law. The Government also took steps to increase the role of women in promoting peace and security. On 17 July, UNAMA facilitated a national conference to build consensus around taking action to ensure accountability for acts of violence against women. On 29 July, the President nominated a female judge to the Afghanistan Supreme Court High Council. If appointed, she will be the first woman to hold that post. On 31 July, the Government launched its second status report on the implementation of the National Action Plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), noting an overall increase in the recruitment of women in the security sector. However, the report also

[2] UNAMA and OHCHR, "Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women" (May 2018), available from www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/AF/UNAMA_OHCHR_EVAW_Report2018_InjusticeImpunity29May2018.pdf.

noted some negative trends, including a decrease in the number of women officers in the Afghan National Army and fewer female members of the High Peace Council.

39. On 26 June, the Government submitted its one-year follow-up report on action taken on three specific recommendations made by the Committee against Torture in its concluding observations on the second periodic review of Afghanistan (CAT/C/AFG/CO/2). The Law on the Prohibition of Torture was reviewed and approved by the National Assembly and awaits final endorsement by the President.

40. As of 30 June, the terms of office of the Commissioners of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission had expired. On 9 July, an earlier presidential order of 26 May 2018 setting out the procedure for the identification and selection of new Commissioners was amended by the President, establishing a two-tier vetting system to ensure diversity among a final pool of 27 applicants. The United Nations no longer observes proceedings under the revised order, and the appointment of the nine Commissioners remains the prerogative of the President alone. The vacancies for the nine Commissioners were published on 15 August and were set to close on 3 September. Journalists and media workers continued to face intimidation and harassment by anti-government elements and pro-government forces. UNAMA documented four incidents of harassment and intimidation in Ghazni, Helmand and Kandahar Provinces.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

41. The Government made some progress towards implementing its reform commitments. On 2 June, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance finalized its implementation plan of the citizen-centred policy for subnational governance, which had been approved on 14 May by the High Council for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption. The plan provides much-needed clarification of the roles of central and provincial authorities and gives details on the new reforms on subnational planning, financing and natural resources management. The Government also made some progress towards improving the capacity of the civil service at the provincial level. On 25 July, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission reported the completion of the mass-recruitment process for civil servant positions, including teachers in the provinces, which had been initiated in January 2018. As a result, 11,176 civil servants were recruited to fill vacant positions in 33 provinces. Those reforms have begun to address the longstanding gaps between the central and the subnational governance units that have undermined the legitimacy of the Government at the local level.

42. The Government also continued its efforts to improve the institutional framework that guides its anti-corruption efforts. On 4 June, the President appointed a new Deputy Attorney General for Anti-Corruption. The draft anti-corruption law was finalized and sent to the Office of the Second Vice-President for review. Since the previous report, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre has tried an additional four cases, bringing the overall caseload of the Centre since it was established in 2016 to 38 cases involving 152 accused persons. As a product of the 24 completed cases, 71 people have been convicted and imprisoned after a final decision by the Supreme Court. However, international partners have expressed their concern about the declining performance of the Centre, including its stagnating caseload, the low level of cases tried by the Centre and the frequent non-enforcement of arrest warrants by the Ministry of the Interior, which means that a high number of cases continue to be tried in absentia without consequences for those who are convicted.

43. On 30 June, UNAMA completed a three-month survey on the implementation of the new Penal Code, which came into force on 14 February 2018. The survey report

will be shared with the international community as well as training institutes of the Supreme Court, the Attorney General and the Ministry of Justice to identify gaps and adjust an ongoing training programme on the Code. The regional courts and prosecution offices were given 1,219 additional copies of the new Penal Code, with the support of UNAMA. An additional 484 copies were printed by the Ministry of Justice and delivered to 22 of the 34 provinces.

44. The Government continued to prioritize private sector reform in an effort to stimulate economic growth and rebalance the private and public sectors. However, growth remained slow, placing at risk the country's gradual economic recovery from the shock caused by the large reduction in the international presence as part of the 2014 security transition. In its biannual Afghanistan Development Update, issued on 7 August, the World Bank projected real gross domestic product growth of 2.4 per cent in 2018, down from 2.7 per cent in 2017, citing security challenges, ongoing drought, declining business confidence and political instability as key constraints on growth. The World Bank further expressed concern that on current projections, economic growth will be unable to meet the demand for employment. Figures from the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment and International Labour Organization suggest 25 per cent of the labour force in the country is not gainfully employed. Furthermore, projections estimate that 480,000 to 600,000 new entrants to the job market are expected annually until 2025, of which an average of 400,000 are estimated to be young people. With approximately 63.7 per cent of Afghans being under the age of 25 years, the post-2001 "youth bulge" requires significantly more efforts to realize the demographic dividend of that age bracket and thus lift the strain on the labour market.

45. On 18 July, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board convened in Kabul. Discussions focused on six key deliverables agreed with the Government ahead of the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan, to be held on 28 November. They included: (a) the holding of free, fair and credible parliamentary and district elections; (b) the finalization of all national priority programmes with the cross-cutting issue of women's empowerment and providing basic services, especially education and health; (c) achieving International Monetary Fund benchmarks; (d) creating an enabling environment for private sector-led growth, including enacting the Mining Law and a new Land Allocation Law; (e) making clear progress against corruption, such as serving all outstanding warrants on allegedly corrupt public officials; and (f) making advances on security sector reforms. The Ministry of Finance established a special task force to monitor results.

46. On 12 August in Kabul, the Government and UNAMA officially launched preparations for the Geneva Ministerial Conference. The event, which will focus on development, growth, poverty reduction and reforms, will see the introduction of a new set of accountability parameters, the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework.

V. Humanitarian assistance and returnees

47. In 2018, 178,002 people were newly displaced by conflict. Between 15 May and 15 August, 31,825 people were displaced. Although conflict-related displacement is down by more than one third compared with the same period in 2017, many displaced families have been forced to move multiple times and have no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin in safety and dignity. During the reporting period, humanitarian partners provided food and other life-saving assistance to 157,684 people displaced by conflict.

48. The demand for trauma care for victims of war increased to 24,687 cases in 2018, an increase of 14 per cent compared with 2017. Needs are particularly high in

Helmand, Kunar, Kunduz and Takhar Provinces, where clashes have taken heavy tolls and access has been reduced. During the reporting period, the 15 partners of the health cluster provided consultations to 584,934 people, of whom 61 per cent were women and girls.

49. Explosive remnants of war and victim-operated improvised explosive devices remain the leading causes of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, with 553 civilian casualties in the first six months of 2018. Currently, 89 per cent of all victims are children. In response, the United Nations and its partners have developed child-friendly materials on explosive remnants of war for initial use in 12 villages, as well as three child-friendly spaces. From January to June 2018, mine action partners removed or destroyed 6,878 explosive remnants of war from battlefields and communities across the country, although the ongoing nature of the conflict continues to increase significantly the contamination and threat levels.

50. Three cases of polio were confirmed during the reporting period, bringing the total number of cases in 2018 to 11. The latest transmissions were reported from two districts (Nad-e-Ali in Helmand Province and Tsowkey in Kunar Province). In total, four provinces have been affected in 2018 (Helmand, Kandahar, Kunar and Nangarhar). In July, the first polio vaccination campaign was carried out during the high-transmission season, and 6,003,849 children aged under 5 years living in high-risk areas were vaccinated.

51. As at 4 August, drought affected 229 out of 401 districts across the country. In Badghis Province, more than 100,000 people have been forced from rural areas to urban centres in Badghis, Ghor and Herat Provinces since early in May. Most of the newly displaced people live in informal settlements with few, if any, basic social services. Rural communities have depleted their assets, selling off livestock to buy food and consuming the coming planting season's seeds. A nationwide emergency assessment is planned to review the chronic food security situation, which is expected to worsen as much of the country enters an early lean season in September. An estimated 1.4 million people are expected to need life-saving emergency assistance in the coming months.

52. Families displaced to urban centres by drought received the same emergency assistance from the United Nations and partners as people displaced by conflict. Food was also provided to families in rural areas to prevent further drought-related displacement. From July to September 2018, the United Nations and its partners were expected to provide food assistance to 441,000 people in Badghis, Faryab, Ghor, Herat and Jowzjan Provinces, which were the worst affected. Beginning late in September 2018, United Nations and its partners will expand the support for at least six months to all of the estimated 1.4 million people in need in 20 provinces due to drought.

53. In order to meet those emergency demands, the Government has mobilized 60,000 tons of wheat grain from its own strategic grain reserves, while the United Nations is procuring complementary commodities from international markets. Based on United Nations estimates, half a million people are in dire need of agriculture- and livestock-based livelihoods support, through the distribution of seeds, fertilizers and fodder. To complement the humanitarian response, development actors are mobilizing their resources and operations under ongoing projects in six provinces relating to climate change adaptation, agricultural value chains and rural development so that they also support community recovery and long-term resilience to drought. The United Nations also plans to carry out clearance activities in Farah Province to increase land availability and lessen the burden of drought-induced displacement on host communities and critical resources. Clearance operations in Kandahar have

enabled the construction of new residential areas, assisting with land access for returnees from Pakistan.

54. A total of 210,724 Afghan citizens, including spontaneous returnees, deportees and refugees, returned to Afghanistan during the reporting period. According to IOM, from 14 May to 18 August 2018, 7,433 undocumented returnees arrived from Pakistan and 198,954 from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the same period, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees assisted the return of 3,859 refugees from Pakistan, 446 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 32 from other countries. The number of registered refugees returning to Afghanistan is significantly lower than the 43,208 who had returned by the same time in 2017. The number of undocumented returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran has soared, with more than 480,000 returnees and deportees in 2018 compared with 215,000 in 2017, in an apparent response to the worsening economic situation there. Humanitarian agencies are trying to reach returnees and provide them with a package of food, cash and other basic necessities to facilitate their reintegration.

55. There continues to be constraints on humanitarian access, with a total of 130 incidents affecting the United Nations and its humanitarian partners from 15 May to 15 August. Since the beginning of the year, a total of 253 incidents have been recorded, including the killings of 23 aid workers. Moreover, 37 have been injured, 74 abducted and 38 detained. The trend of more violent and deliberate attacks on health facilities and health workers has continued. During the reporting period, the task force on monitoring and reporting humanitarian access reported nine incidents where such access was denied, including seven by the Taliban, one by ISIL-KP and one by pro-government militia, compared with 18 such incidents in the previous quarter. Deminers face an increasing risk of kidnapping and armed violence. During the reporting period, two significant incidents occurred, including the first prolonged kidnapping by ISIL-KP. Humanitarian access in contested areas and areas under the control of anti-government elements remained a persistent challenge.

56. The 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan was revised in May to include an additional $117 million to provide assistance to 1.4 million people affected by the drought. Altogether, the revised Plan calls for nearly $547 million and plans to reach 4. 2 million people in 2018. As at 20 August, humanitarian activities in Afghanistan had received $231.1 million in funding, including $175.8 million for activities included in the Plan.

VI. Counter-narcotics

57. During the reporting period, the Government started working on a new national drugs strategy in response to recent increases in opium cultivation and production. Regionally, the new strategy is backed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and its partners under the strategic actions to respond to the global threats of opiates. Aimed at addressing the related threats of crime, terrorism and corruption, the strategic actions encompass a more effective methodology building on the concerted "One UNODC" approach in Europe and Western and Central Asia.

58. The Government, supported by international partners, continued its counter-narcotics operations. During the period from 1 January to 30 June 2018, the Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 1,804 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 1,584 kilograms of heroin, 6,767 kilograms of morphine, 12,030 kilograms of opium, 61 kilograms of methamphetamine, 15,426 kilograms of hashish, 10,176 tablets of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), 15,537 kilograms of solid precursor chemicals and 7,774 litres of liquid precursor chemicals. In total, 22 heroin manufacturing laboratories were dismantled; 2,039 suspects were arrested;

and 311 vehicles, 134 weapons and 598 mobile telephones were seized. Three officers of the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police were killed while carrying out counter-narcotics operations.

VII. Mission support

59. As at 31 July, the Mission's vacancy rates were 10 per cent for international staff, 11 per cent for National Professional Officers and 3 per cent for local-level staff, compared with the approved rates of 11.1 per cent, 8.5 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively. The proportion of female staff remained very low. As at 31 July, the percentage of women in each category of staff stood at 34 per cent for international staff, 38 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 12 per cent for National Professional Officers and 7 per cent for local-level staff. Between 1 May and 31 July 2018, UNAMA conducted 160 road and 23 air missions, as well as 970 reverse outreach missions, during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

60. Afghanistan is nearly in the fifth year its Transformation Decade (2015–2024), which began with the drawdown of international forces in 2014. As it approaches the midpoint, the political, economic and security challenges the country faces remain significant and complex. In addition to low rates of economic growth, high unemployment and rising levels of conflict-related displacement, more immediate problems, such as the ongoing drought, have pushed vulnerable communities to the brink. The conflict continues its unrelenting toll on the civilian population, whose daily struggle amid insecurity is compounded by the inhumanity of terror attacks. As parliamentary and presidential elections near, there is an urgent need for political leaders to demonstrate a unity of purpose and guide Afghanistan towards greater stability and self-reliance.

61. The Eid al-Fitr ceasefire period was a vivid expression of the widespread desire for peace among Afghans. The first ceasefire since 2001, it brought scenes of celebration among Afghan civilians, Afghan national security forces and Taliban fighters alike, proving that Afghans from diverse religious, tribal and civil society groups strongly desire peace. The brevity of the ceasefire period does not undermine its significance, nor do the subsequent attacks that have tested efforts to reach a peaceful settlement. The United Nations emphasizes the need for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan and invites all efforts towards that most urgent objective.

62. I regret that the Taliban did not accept the call by the President in his statement on Eid al-Adha to engage in direct negotiations to end the conflict, and that it did not join the Government in the proposed ceasefire. I encourage Member States to cooperate towards achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan, with the aim of direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. The United Nations continues to engage with all parties and stands ready to provide all support necessary.

63. I am deeply concerned about the worsening effect of the conflict on the civilian population. In the first half of 2018, the conflict caused the death of 1,692 civilians, the highest number of civilian deaths recorded in a six-month period since UNAMA began its systematic documentation in 2009. The targeting of civilian infrastructure — from schools and hospitals to media offices and aid providers — underscores the violence directed at the fabric of Afghan society. I urge all parties to respect their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law to prevent attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure.

64. Insecurity, violence, poverty and unemployment continue to have a heavy impact on the young people of Afghanistan. I condemn the recent spate of horrific attacks against education facilities, in particular a girls' schools in Nangarhar Province and an education center in Kabul. Such violence, along with the reported closure of schools by anti-Government elements, represents an assault on the fundamental and constitutional right of all Afghans to an education. The criminalization of child-related offences in the new Penal Code is a much-needed step towards protecting the most vulnerable members of society, including from recruitment and use by armed groups, and must be enforced. I applaud the readiness of the Government of Afghanistan to engage on those sensitive topics and all youth-related matters, recognizing the needs of that most sizable age group of the Afghan population. I welcome the selection in June 2018 of the Afghanistan Youth Representative to the United Nations as an opportunity for further engagement, including on the role of the United Nations.

65. I commend the Government on its efforts to improve the capacity of the formal justice system to prosecute and adjudicate cases of violence against women. However, the severe constraints in obtaining redress for sexual and gender-based violence, as well as high levels of de facto impunity affecting all citizens of Afghanistan, highlight the need for continued efforts in the promotion and protection of human rights. I encourage the Afghan authorities to take all measures necessary to support the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in fulfilling its critical role as an effective and independent institution.

66. I am encouraged by the efforts of the electoral management bodies in Afghanistan in preparing under challenging circumstances for the elections scheduled for 20 October 2018. The preparation for the first time of a voter list that links each voter to a polling station is a truly significant step forward in strengthening the integrity of the elections. At the same time, I am concerned about the blockade of the premises of the Independent Election Commission, both at its headquarters and in some provinces, by protestors contesting the exclusion of certain candidates by the Electoral Complaints Commission. Those actions delay the legitimate activities of the Independent Election Commission and do not advance any democratic cause. I call upon the protestors to cease immediately any hindrance to the work of the Independent Election Commission.

67. While timely and credible technical preparations are essential, they cannot, by themselves, solve political concerns. The primary responsibility for a successful election lies with the political leaders from across the political spectrum. That includes the responsibility to engage constructively and peacefully in the process, to prevent and discourage fraud and to refrain from declaring instances of irregularity — or simply unfavourable outcomes — as proof of a fraudulent election. Therefore, I am deeply concerned about the threat of a boycott of the elections.

68. Something valuable is lost when political actors decide to withdraw from an electoral process. It results in fewer options for citizens to participate and have their voice heard, in favour of more narrow expressions of protest or abstention. I therefore urge all political leaders to remain engaged in the electoral process and to pursue concerns and any founded complaints with the national electoral authorities. I encourage the national authorities to continue actively to prevent and detect possible irregularities and to consider evidence of potential malfeasance when presented to them. The United Nations will continue to stand by and assist the electoral authorities of Afghanistan with technical knowledge and other support, in recognition of Afghan leadership and ownership in conducting this sovereign process.

69. This year, Afghanistan is on track to collect enough revenue to cover 50 per cent of its operating budget. While this trend points to the potential for further

development financing and the possibility of generating growth, acute emergency needs are rising, particularly given the levels of internal displacement and the fact that the country is facing its worst drought in 10 years. As discussed at the meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, held in Kabul on 18 July, the complexity of the humanitarian and development issues simultaneously confronting Afghanistan makes the planned discussions at the Geneva Ministerial Conference especially timely.

70. The Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan will provide a valuable opportunity for the international community to renew its political commitment to Afghanistan and for the Government to demonstrate progress on key commitments. The Conference takes place at a critical juncture, halfway between the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan in 2016 and the next pledging conference, expected to be held in 2020. As preparations accelerate, I call upon the Government to direct its unified efforts to delivering on key commitments prior to the Geneva Conference.

71. I thank all of the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfilling our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan.